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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to determine the communication characteristics which group members perceive as constituting the amount of influence of a designated leader, the communication characteristics which designated leaders perceive as consituting their own amount of influence, and the degree of similarity between the leader's and others' perceptions of the communication characteristics concerning the designated leader's influence. Twenty-three task oriented small group discussions, ranging in membership from three to six undergraduates, were used in this study. The results on the degree of similarity between the other group members' perceptions of the designated leader's influence and the designated leaders' perceptions of their influence with the five communication characteristics indicated moderately high relationships. (RB)

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AN INVESTIGATION OF A DESIGNATED LEADER'S PERCEIVED INFLUENCE IN SMALL TASK-ORIENTED GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Kathy Polvi and Diane Tobin

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Purpose

This study was designed to answer the following three questions:

(1) What communication characteristics do group members perceive as constituting the amount of influence of a designated leader?

(2) What communication characteristics do designated leaders perceive as constituting their own amount of influence on the group?

(3) What is the degree of the similarity between the leader's and others' perceptions of the communication characteristics concerning the designated leader's influence?

Related Research

The investigation reported here is an outgrowth of six previous studies. In 1950, Carter et al. focused on the difference between the appointed and emergent leader by studying the various types of behavior that differentiate the leader from the other group members in task oriented activities. The behaviors examined included personal feelings (e.g., confusion, friendliness, etc.) personal actions (e.g., performs simple work unit, stands around doing nothing), and oral communication behavior (e.g., gives information, disagrees, etc.). The largest percentage of behaviors examined were communication behavior. Of the 53 factors, only two (makes interpretations and gives information on carrying out action) differentiated leaders from other group members; both of these were communication characteristics.[1]

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[1] Launor Carter et al., "The Behavior of Leaders and other Group Members," in Group Dynamics: Research and Theory, ed. Dorwin Cathwright and Alvin Zander, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 381-388.

In 1964, Mortenson did a content analysis of leadership in small task-oriented groups. He used ten content categories, five of which were communication characteristics and five which were group members' responses to these characteristics. Looking at the communication patterns of groups, he compared the communication behavior of designated and emergent leaders. His goal was to determine if the presence of a designated leader altered the communication process. One of the significant findings of the study was that the success or failure of the assigned leader depends on the other group members' perceptions of his influence.[2]

Also in the 1960's, Hollander made general speculations concerning leadership effectiveness and maintenance. He theorized that the influence process is comprised of three factors: the source, the mode of interpersonal activities, and the recipient. On this basis, he made several generalizations. Two of the most significant are that the type of group affects a designated leader's influence and that the perceptions of other group members also affect his influence.[3]

Russell, recognizing the need to study specific communication characteristics in relationship to a leader's influence, conducted a study of appointed leaders in problem-solving discussions. Out of a possible fifteen communication variables, he determined four which were the most basic elements of a leader's communication behavior. They included: opinionatedness, agreement, orientation, and clarity. Only opinionatedness was always found to be present in appointed leaders who were able to maintain their position. Agreement was significantly related, but it was not solely attributed to successful leaders.[4]

Lumsden later continued Russell's investigation by focusing on agreement behavior. Her objective was to determine if there is a casual relationship between agreement and leadership maintenance. She found that while leaders who use agreement were seen as more objective and, thus, receive more support from group members, there was no significant difference

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[2]Calvin D. Mortensen, "Should the Discussion Group Have an Assigned Leader?" The Speech Teacher, 15 (Jan. 1966), pp. 34-41.

[3]Edwin P. Hollander, "Leadership, Innovation, and Influence," in Current Perspectives in Social Psychology, ed. Edwin P. Hollander and Raymond G. Hunt, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford Press, 1967), pp. 485-489; Edwin P. Hollander, Leaders, Groups, and Influence (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 225-238.

[4]Hugh C. Russell, "An Investigation of Leadership Maintenance Behavior," Diss. Indiana University, 1970.

between members' perceptions of agreeable and disagreeable leaders and their actual influence.[5]

The present study was another step in advancing our knowledge about the communication characteristics that are associated with a designated leader's influence. The investigation most directly relates to Russell's study; however, we altered the type of group and three of his communication variables. Unlike the other studies, we have specifically correlated the self-perception of the designated leader's influence with other group members' perceptions of his influence.

Communication Variables

The communication characteristics used in this study to determine a designated leader's influence in small task-oriented discussion groups are defined as follows:

(1) Ethos--the discussant's degree of credibility, competence, respect, and likeableness.

(2) Coordination--the degree to which the discussant was able to help move the group toward its goals, to reduce tension, and to resolve conflicts.

(3) Information--the degree to which the discussant contributed useful knowledge and suggestions based on facts, statistics, qualified opinions, and experience.

(4) Objectivity--the degree to which the discussant was openminded, unbiased, and considered others' points of view.

(5) Dynamism--the Degree to which the discussant was enthusiastic, energetic, alert, and active.

The choice of these variables and their definitions is based on related research and the intuitive suspicions of the investigators. Ethos and dynamism were chosen because Lumsden felt that for a leader to be influential he must be credible.[6] These two variables were taken directly from Whitehead's source credibility scale.[7] Coordination was chosen because it was found to be a significant variable in leader influence

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[5]Gay Lumsden, "An Experimental Study of the Effect of Verbal Agreement on Leadership Maintenance in Problem Solving Discussions," Diss. Indiana University, 1972.

[6]Ibid., p. 29.

[7]Jack L. Whitehead, Jr., "Factors of Source Credibility," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 54 (1969), pp. 59-63.

in the studies by Carter, Mortensen, Russell, Gouran, and Knutson.[8] Objectivity, which was examined by Hollander, Russell, and Lumsden, was chosen because of its repeated relevance pertaining to communication behavior associated with leader's influence.[9] Information was used on the basis of Russell's suggestion that it might be an important communication variable to be studied in a designated leader's influence in small groups.[10]

Data Collection

Twenty-three task-oriented small group discussions, ranging in size from three to six members, were used in this study. The sample consisted of undergraduates enrolled in beginning sections of Public Speaking, Interpersonal Communication, and Business and Professional Speaking at Indiana University. Prior to the start of each session, the instructor was given four sets of cards lettered A through F. Each group member randomly chose a letter that was later used to identify him on a questionnaire. Those individuals who chose letter B were designated as the leader of each discussion. The instructor presented no instructions to the group concerning the role of the designated leaders. The groups proceeded as originally planned. The investigators were not involved other than to read a set of prepared instructions and to distribute a questionnaire during the last ten minutes of the class. No further explanation was given after the questionnaires were collected.

The questionnaire was constructed to be precise, consise, and readable. The first two scales were used to determine the overall ranking and rating of the designated leader's influence in the group. Semantic differential scales representing each of the five communication variables were used to rate the designated leaders' communication behavior.

Statistical Analyses

The data were collected, and the influence rankings and ratings were examined to determine which communication characteristics were associated with perceptions of the appointed leader's influence. The

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[8]Carter, p. 383-386; Mortenson, p. 36; Russell, p. 91-96; Dennis S. Gouran, "An Investigation to Identify the Critical Variables Related to Consensus in Group Discussions of Policy," Project N. 8-F-004, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare: Office of Education, January 1, 1969; Thomas J. Knutson, "An Experimental Study of the Effects of Statements Giving Orientation on the Probability of Reaching Consensus in Group Discussions of Questions of Policy," Diss. Indiana University, 1970.

[9]Hollander, p. 232; Russell, pp. 30-58; Lumsden, pp. 29-30.

[10]Russell, p. 90.

ratings which the designated leaders received on the five communication variables were used in three different analyses. First, we correlated the group members' perceptions of the designated leaders' influence with the five communication characteristics. A regression analysis was used to show which of the five variables was most closely related to influence. The relevant data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

GROUP MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE DESIGNATED LEADER'S INFLUENCE

Correlation Matrix

Variable Number	Ave. Influence Rating	Ethos	Coordination	Information	Objectivity	Dynamism
1	1.000	-.547	-.808	-.691	-.558	-.693
2		1.000	.700	.658	.530	.636
			1.000	.858	.800	.894
				1.000	.708	.809
					1.000	.804
						1.000

Summary

Step Number	Variable Entered	Variable Removed	Multiple R	Multiple RSQ	Increase in RSQ	F Value to Enter or Remove
1	3		.8082	.6533	.6533	39.5630
2	5		.8216	.6570	.0218	1.3403
3	2		.8225	.6764	.0014	.0832

The second analysis was a correlation of the designated Leaders' self perceptions with the five communication variables. A regression analysis procedure was used to determine the dominant variable(s) determining the leader's influence. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

THE DESIGNATED LEADER'S SELF PERCEPTION OF HIS INFLUENCE

Correlation Matrix

Variable Number	Ave. Influence Rating	Ethos	Coordination	Information	Objectivity	Dynamism
1	1.000	-.353	-.459	-.073	.152	-.245
2		1.000	.829	.730	.463	.615
3			1.000	.575	.429	.759
4				1.000	.647	.515
5					1.000	.585
6						1.000

Summary

Step Number	Variable Entered	Variable Removed	Multiple R	Multiple RSQ	Increase in RSQ	F Value to Enter or Remove
1	3		.4592	.2109	.2109	5.6121
2	5		.6004	.3605	.1496	4.6788

Finally, the leaders' self ratings were correlated with their colleagues' ratings to determine the degree of similarity between self and others' perceptions of the leader's communication characteristics. F-tests determined the significance of the relationships. The correlation coefficients are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

CORRELATION OF GROUP MEMBER'S RATINGS OF DESIGNATED LEADERS' INFLUENCE WITH DESIGNATED SELF RATINGS OF INFLUENCE

Row	Ave. Influence Rating	Ethos	Coordination	Information	Objectivity	Dynamism
	-.6076	.1895	.4614	.4127	.3986	.5661

In the first analysis, as Table 2 shows, all five variables were related to perceptions of influence. The combination of ethos, coordination, and objectivity were the best predictors of a designated leader's perceived influence on the group, and coordination by itself was the best single predictor.

The data reported in Tables 3 and 4 reveal that coordination and objectivity in combination show a greater relationship to influence than any other single characteristic or any other combination of characteristics. Coordination again was the best single predictor of leader influence.

The results on the degree of similarity between the other group members' perceptions of the designated leader's influence and the designated leaders' perceptions of their influence with the five communication characteristics indicated moderately high relationships. More specifically, significant correlations were found in the cases of leader's influence, coordination, information, and dynamism.

Discussion and Conclusions

Four major conclusions can be drawn on the basis of these results. First, we can conclude that from the group members' point of view that all five of the communication characteristics are perceived as important

factors in determining a leader's influence.

Second, we can conclude that designated leaders perceive coordination in combination with objectivity to be the determinants of their influence as a leader. Finding such a relationship is not surprising since the designated leader probably felt that it was his responsibility to move the group toward its goal, that he was under pressure to live up to the teacher and group's expectations in a very short period of time, and that he was obligated to be as objective as possible. The finding is consistent with Carter et al. who found that designated leaders perceive their role as that of a coordinator, an agent by which the group can accomplish its goal.[11] It also coincides with the position of Hollander who believes that a factor in determining a leader's influence is his personal motivation.[12]

Third, we can conclude that the designated leader and group members' perceptions of the leader's coordination, information, and dynamism correspond as do their ratings of the leader's overall influence. It is understandable that these three communication variables correspond since these characteristics are more observable than ethos or objectivity. Hollander supports this idea by showing that observable behaviors are easier to evaluate.[13] Another possible explanation is that there is more consensus concerning what these three characteristics are and that the limitations of the classroom situation in a large university make it impossible for the group members to form accurate impressions of the leader.

Finally, one overall conclusion can be drawn. It can be said that coordination is the most prominent variable in determining a designated leader's influence under the following conditions. There are several possible reasons for the apparent dominance of this variable. First, the study used task oriented groups, and as Carter et al. found, the requirements of the task and the formal character of the group structure can often determine the type of behavior we characterized as coordination.[14] Second, there was a very limited amount of time to accomplish the goals set forth by the instructor.

Limitations

In retrospect, we believe that the results and subsequent conclusions of this study are not generalizable beyond the particular conditions under which the study was conducted. There are three major

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[11] Carter, p. 386

[12] Hollander, p. 228

[13] Ibid., p. 230

[14] Carter, pp. 386-387

limitations of the study that have led us to this conclusion. First, time may have been a factor in determining the results. The maximum period for interaction was thirty minutes, and that was possible only under ideal conditions if no time was wasted at the beginning of class. The groups were temporary which would also affect their time utilization, their cooperation, and their effectiveness. Some of the groups were scheduled to meet for two days, and since we recorded the results of only the first session, the leader's motivation and behavior could have been different toward the end of the discussion when the group became pressed for time.

A second factor which may have significantly affected the outcome of the study was the limitations of the classroom situation. Here factors such as grading pressure, relevance of the assignment, time of the class, and attitude toward the class may have influenced the results. For example, if a student did not find the task to be relevant, his participation in the group would be affected. As a result, his communication behavior would not reflect accurately his potential ability to help move the group toward its goals.

Finally, the subjects' attitudes toward experimental studies may have been a factor in their attitude toward the questionnaire. This is particularly true in a large university where undergraduates are frequently subjected to experimentation. Because of the vast number of questionnaires a student is expected to fill out each semester in introductory courses, an experimenter can not be assured of receiving thoughtful and honest reactions.

Suggestions for Future Research

We believe that research in the communication behavior of leaders should be continued. In order to verify the conclusions of this study and make them more generalizable, we first suggest that a similar study be conducted with a different type of sample. (e.g. different age groups, professions, educational levels, etc.). Since Russell and Lumsden both focused on problem-solving groups and since this study used task-oriented groups, it would be interesting to study social groups to determine which communication characteristics would be most significant in determing leader influence.[15] We would speculate that observable behaviors such as ethos and dynamism would be more dominant than coordination. The duration of the group may also be varied to determine if that is a factor in perceptions of the leader's influence and his communication characteristics. As a continuation of our study and the study by Carter et al., it would be beneficial to examine the specific communication characteristics affecting the influence of the emergent leader.[16] Perhaps the most useful and challenging possibility for future research would be

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[15] Russell; Lumsden.

[16] Carter.

to continue Lumsden's attempt to determine whether causal relationships exist between the communication variables and the leader's influence.[17]

In summary, all five of the communication characteristics tested were found to be related to perceptions of a designated leader's influence in small task-oriented group discussions--either individually or in some combination. Coordination was the most dominant of these. We hope that research will be continued to further the understanding of communication behavior in small groups.

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[17] Lumsden.